

Rights sold: Armenia - ORACLE, Russia - EKSMO, Serbia - GEOPOETIKA

Shortlisted for the 2014 Ivan Belkin literary award

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Yuri Buida's *Poison and Honey* is a modern Russian family saga that focuses on a house and a family, the Osorins, covering lives, ambitions, and deaths, including murder most foul. Buida manages to weave together what sometimes feels like legions of characters and an entire history book of world culture, creating a compact, packed story that's realistic, mythical, and metaphysical. It's also strangely enjoyable and even more strangely suspenseful.

Buida's first-person narrator is Semyon Semyonovich, who's not, by blood, an Osorin but who becomes part of the extended family when his grandfather, a physician's assistant, brings him to the Osorins' house as a little boy. The house, which is set on a hill, is sometimes known as the House of the Twelve Angels. The house is magnificent, and it contains, among other things, statues and paintings of naked women, a set of twelve bronze figures of horsemen, a cat named Sophie Auguste Friederike von Anhalt-Zerbst, and a matriarch known as Tati. Semyon becomes a long-term member of the extended household after Tati invites him back to play with her nephews: when the book ends, decades later, Semyon is working with the family's archives, making him a sort of inside outsider. Semyon chronicles Osorin family history, too, as the narrator of *Poison and Honey*, telling of affairs, careers in literature and intelligence, and, of course, numerous enmities.

Everything changes in a very big way at the house on the hill when Ilya (son of one of Tati's nephews) slides off an icy road, hits a young woman named Olga Shvarts, and then brings her home. Olga's unhurt, at least initially: she stays at the house until she winds up dead (and

naked) a few days later. Olga's the archetypical outsider in many ways, someone who wants to become part of a house and family like the Osorins', with its chiming clocks, heraldry, and old glory. After Olga's death, Tati interviews members of the household, and Semyon duly describes the proceedings... until, that is, his wife gives birth during the night. Buida references Agatha Christie as well as Dostoevsky as he describes the interviews. One alibi is a bank robbery.

When Semyon returns the next morning (It's a boy!), the whodunit aspect of the story has been resolved, at least on a certain level, though the identity of the killer isn't revealed. Then follows the breakfast scene: everyone sits down to a usual breakfast—salads, sandwiches with ham and cheese, somewhat stale bread, butter, tea, and coffee—but the family is wearing nice dresses and suits, and the table is set with a white table cloth, crystal, and silver. There's even Champagne. And then the resolution to the murder is announced.

Poison and Honey is thoroughly lively and oddly lovely, in part because the pace is brisk and Buida works in so many references to history and culture, folding in lots of high society and low doings. Like murder most foul, in its literal and literary senses. One of the central elements of *Poison and Honey*

is clearly homes, homelessness, and uprootedness: toward the end of the novella, Tati tells Semyon that Russians are only truly at home in church and at war, after all, they might lose their homes because of war, arrest, and fire. Tati, however, wants her family to keep living in her house—where the clock will continue to chime and people will continue discussing the Russian idea—for hundreds of years. This, after all, is a house where artists, musicians, writers, and dissidents discussed everything from the Prague Spring to Solzhenitsyn.

For all that talk about the family and the house, though, just about everyone in the Osorin household seems supremely unhappy. That's probably as it should be since this family—like the circumstances surrounding Olga's murder—feels so hermetically sealed in at The House of Twelve Angels that the issue of who's who as an individual feels almost as irrelevant as the issue of who-really-dunit in an atmosphere where guilt feels collective.

The *Poison and Honey* contains the novella plus a clutch of stories, collectively known as "chronicles," about the Osorin family.

This text contains excerpts from the review published in Lizok's Bookshelf blog (<http://lizoksbooks.blogspot.com>)

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